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SUBJECT: AN OVERVIEW OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN ACTIVISM IN THE
EU: PART ONE

Classified By: USEU POLMINCOUNS CHRIS DAVIS, FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Five years ago the EU experienced its largest expansion to date with the accession of ten new member states*eight of which were Central European post-communist states*followed by the entry of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, which together comprise what is commonly known as the Central European ten (CE-10). This will be the first in a series of cables that examines how the CE-10 are functioning within the EU system and how effectively they are working among themselves and with other member states to accomplish their priorities. Planned subsequent cables will examine issues of particular concern to the new members in greater detail, including energy security, EU-Russia policy, eastern partnership, future EU enlargement, democratization, and climate change. While local EU observers judge that France, Germany, and the United Kingdom maintain a key role in driving EU policies, the CE-10 are likely to increase their relative influence as they become more experienced navigators of the EU system and switch from being net recipients of the EU budget to net contributors. As the process of their Europeanization continues, so does the possibility that US influence over the CE-10 will wane. Central European influence in the EU is especially likely to be boosted when a CE-10 state is able to win the support of at least one of the big three for a particular initiative and simultaneously forge an alliance on that issue with either its regional peers or with smaller Western EU member states. End summary.

New Central European Members Still Learning How the EU Works

12. (SBU) The pinnacle of the accession process for the ten post-communist states was clearly May 2004 for the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and January 2007 for Bulgaria and Romania, but the process did not end on those dates. CE-10 states remain engaged in a complex process through which they are being institutionalized within the EU system while increasingly becoming similar to Western European political, cultural, and societal models. In practical terms, new member states are retraining their civil servants and diplomats to better understand how the EU works and how their respective ministries should interact with EU institutions. Indeed, when asked what prevents the CE-10 from being more active initiators of EU policies, a common response from local EU experts and CE-10 diplomats alike is that the new members are still learning how the system works and that they often lack the expertise needed to effectively influence the direction of such policies.

13. (C) The EU's enshrined consensus approach is gradually being learned by some of the CE-10 states. For example, although Warsaw now espouses a more cooperative and image-conscious approach to dealing with other member states under the leadership of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the previous government's hard-line approach in blocking the renegotiation of the EU's Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia in late 2006 is still undermining Warsaw's credibility in Brussels. Piotr Maciej Kaczynski, a fellow with the Brussels based Center for European Policy Studies, recently shared with Poloff that certain member

states, notably Austria and Italy, but to an increasingly lesser degree France and Germany, still harbor the view of Poland as EU troublemaker and are hesitant to cooperate with Warsaw on shared priorities such as energy security. Using their EU Presidencies as an Expertise Building Tool

14. (C) EU experts posit that as the CE-10 states pass through their scheduled six-month Presidencies of the Council of the European Union* Slovenia in 2008, the Czech Republic presently, Hungary and Poland scheduled for 2011* they are likely to approach the beginning of the end of what local pundits have termed their respective EU learning processes. Poloff met on 21 January with Blaz Visnar, currently working for the European Commission on Competition Issues, who had worked for the Slovenian Permanent Representation to the EU during Ljubljana's EU's presidency from January to June 2008. Visnar pointed out that the experience of holding the presidency forced Slovenia to deal with EU issues Ljubljana previously had little interest in* and possibly a lack of capacity to follow* such as Latin American policies. He pointed out that because interest and expertise in his capital on many issues was often so low, he often was able to coordinate policies from Brussels directly at the ministerial level, surprising more established EU member states with the pace at which decisions could be made. Visnar stated that the presidency was especially significant for Slovenian capacity building and for teaching Ljubljana how to prioritize its objectives. He noted that he witnessed a boost in confidence levels among Slovene officials in raising issues at the EU level that had not existed prior to the presidency. Visnar did, however, point out that more established member states* and repeatedly mentioned France* tended to treat Slovenia in a patronizing manner

BRUSSELS 00000134 002 OF 004

that was at times obnoxious during the Slovene presidency. He asserted that the CE-10 would have to continue to work hard to be taken more seriously by other member states.

15. (SBU) For its part, the current Czech presidency has provoked some negative press coverage in the first weeks of its tenure, notably for a statement by a presidency spokesman terming Israeli actions in Gaza as defensive, which went beyond what was acceptable to other EU states. A Czech presidency art exhibit currently on display in an EU Council building that depicts stereotypes member states have of each other caused the Bulgarian Ambassador to request the his country's portrayal be covered up. Finally, Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek was the subject of negative press for describing the Lisbon Treaty as worse than the Nice Treaty to MEPs in Strasbourg on 14 January. Perhaps realizing he had gone too far, Topolanek then said he was joking and would support its ratification. On a more positive note, Topolanek's diplomatic skills have been noted in EU circles for dealing rapidly with Russian gas shortages. The challenge the Czech Republic faces is how to balance emerging crises with its presidency priorities, all the while maintaining credibility to speak on behalf of all EU member states.

16. (SBU) Administering the EU Presidency is a significant investment on the part of member states that focuses all national governmental elements on the presidency; indeed, virtually the entire diplomatic corps of the Czech Republic is focused on EU issues, with perhaps unintended consequences. The Czech Republic's Permanent Representation to the European Union in Brussels exudes heightened energy as the size of the Mission has doubled over the last year to 200 to support the Presidency. As is common with small and medium-sized EU members, the Czechs brought in reinforcements from various ministries in Prague and Czech embassies worldwide, and pulled in Czech experts from EU institutions in Brussels. Speaking at the Center for European Policy Studies on 19 January, Czech Ambassador to the EU Milena Vicenova told the audience that the occasion of the Czech EU presidency provided her country with a significant EU learning opportunity and opined that the constant stream of Czech government officials from Prague to Brussels during this period would have profound effects on Czech knowledge of

how the EU works well beyond their presidency. After the Czech Presidency, Prague should stand to benefit from this cadre of experientially trained government workers who understand how the EU functions, which could provide the expertise needed to enhance Czech activism in the EU.
View from Prague

17. (C) Embassy Prague points out that while the Czech Republic has shown activism in the EU on energy security, democracy and human rights promotion, Eastern partnership and the Balkans, a set of factors inhibit the Czechs from playing an even greater role. These obstacles include domestic politics, the current role of the big three EU states, lingering perceptions among the more established EU states of the CE-10 as second class members, and limited capacities of the newer member states. Domestic politics in Central Europe tend to be approached as a zero sum game in which compromises are rare, and when confronted with slim legislative majorities, such as is the case in the Czech Republic, or a deeply divided political landscape as is the case in Hungary, or an inward looking government as currently exists in Slovakia, leaders from the CE-10 tend to become preoccupied with domestic concerns and devote little attention to EU issues. This is compounded by the fact that France, Germany and the United Kingdom dominate the EU policymaking process, which perhaps serves to justify in the minds of Central European politicians their own domestic focus; better to focus on issues where they might make a difference. Embassy Prague points out that French leadership during the Gaza conflict, for example, left little room for the Czechs to take a more active role, despite their presidency. This cycle could be broken if the Big Three pursue initiatives that are squarely at odds with priorities of CE-10 states, which would likely serve to encourage greater EU activism on the parts of the newer member states. The CE-10 are also still battling perceptions harbored by the older EU member states that the states that joined since 2004 are second class members, and perhaps their own fears of being treated as such. Embassy Prague points out that no one in the Czech government has forgotten former French President Chirac's infamous statement in 2003 that the Central and Eastern European countries missed a good opportunity to be silent on the subject of the Iraq war. Hence, when French President Sarkozy made statements critical of missile defense in the fall of 2008, Czech Deputy Prime Minister Vondra drafted an op-ed in response entitled 'Some Respect Please.' Finally, the newer member states are challenged with limited diplomatic capacities. Because the Slovenes, for example, do not have many embassies, they had to rely on the French to represent their presidency in many parts of the world. The Czechs have also been confronted with such

BRUSSELS 00000134 003 OF 004

limits, which has hampered their respective work in Central Asia, Africa, and on energy.

Increasing Influence by Contributing to the EU Budget

18. (SBU) Poloff met on 21 November in Washington with David Kral, Director of Europeum, a Prague-based thinktank focusing on EU issues and the CE-10, who posited that as the new member states transition from being net beneficiaries of the EU budget to net contributors, their influence over EU policies will correspondingly increase. Kral asserts that once the new members start paying more into the EU budget than they receive, they will have more of a say*and interest*as to where and how such funds are used. According to the EU Office for Regional Policy, the CE-10 member states*each of which is a net beneficiary of EU funds*combined are eligible to receive just over 50 percent of all available EU structural funds, representing some \$232 billion over the 2007-2013 budgetary period. These funds are expected to support the modernization and diversification of Central European economies, thereby accelerating the process by which the new member states converge with Western European development levels.

Priorities of the Central European Member States Within the EU

19. (C) Following the collapse of communism, the Central European states, foreign policies were almost exclusively

focused on integration into Western and European institutional frameworks. For some fifteen years, these states had to respect the rules of the club they wanted to join without having a say in shaping those rules. The Central European states were compelled to bring their national laws into accordance with the *acquis*,⁸ the complete body of EU law, in order to be eligible for membership, and this process tended to dominate domestic political landscapes, leaving little room for the consideration of other or future priorities. While many in Central Europe viewed the process as valuable and necessary so that their countries could prove their readiness to be EU members, in the view of others, especially Euroskeptics like Czech President Vaclav Klaus, Central Europe has once again been forced to accept outside entities, laws. Unlike the case of Spain, which local EU experts point to as an example of a member state that used its time prior to accession to train its diplomatic cadre so as to hit the ground running once it joined the EU, Central European states tend not to have developed such EU expertise and are viewed as less active on the broader range of issues the EU considers.

¶10. (SBU) Local pundits posit that having achieved their major foreign policy goal of accession, and being net recipients of EU funds, these new members are largely content to sit back and follow the EU consensus as it develops and rarely initiate policies, except in key areas that directly affect their national interests. Areas where constellations of CE-10 states appear to focus their attention, and over time could increase their influence, include: 1) energy security, which is important given the new member states overwhelming dependence on Russia for their gas and oil; 2) EU-Russia policy, an area where Poland and the Baltic states have shown a propensity for activism given their historically often tense relations with Russia; 3) Eastern partnership, as the states in question, including Belarus and Ukraine, are at the new member states borders; 4) human rights and democracy promotion, in some cases as far afield as Cuba and Burma, due to the CE-10's own historic struggles to build their democracies; 5) EU Enlargement, which the CE-10 generally support despite differences in priorities; 6) protecting their equities on climate change, given that the new members are starting from a retrograde position on environmental standards.

New Europe is Not a Unified Group

¶11. (C) As is evidenced by the list of priorities above, what is often dubbed *New Europe*⁸ does not act as a coherent group within the EU. These states, desire to join the EU was a unifying factor during the run up to accession, but once this objective was achieved, regional cooperation appears to have waned. In fact, as more EU states*now 27*compete for common resources, perceptions of competition among Central European states have increased. Petr Chalupecky, the Deputy Director of the Security Policy Department in the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, noted to Poloffs on 13 January in Brussels that cooperation among the CE-10 depends on the issue at hand and noted that the political orientation of particular governments matters greatly. By way of example, Chalupecky pointed out that Prague presently enjoys much better cooperation on security issues with Warsaw than it does with Bratislava, and while citing missile defense he opined that this is not limited to security matters, but affects all issues. Chalupecky stated that Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico's eastern orientation and his overt support for the Czech main opposition party places him squarely at odds with the current Czech government, making the possibility of cooperation extremely difficult. Still, to be fair, Chalupecky pointed out that the Czechs and Slovaks were able to cooperate in the face of

BRUSSELS 00000134 004 OF 004

recent Russian gas cutoffs, with a plan having been devised to make Slovak gas reserves available to the Czech Republic. Chalupecky told Poloffs that Prague's long standing position is to view NATO as the Czech Republic's primary security guarantor, and while the Czechs will carry forward recent French ESDP initiatives, Prague is strongly inclined to place

any focus on ESDP on its civilian aspects. Chaluppecky nonetheless opined that military capability development in an EU context can be an important political tool to encourage defense spending, pooling of resources, and specialization. Overall, Chaluppecky posited that the Czechs and other new members will be working with countries throughout Europe on an issue-by-issue basis, and asserted that the common historical experiences of the post-communist states as a force that connects the region and especially regional groupings like the Visegrad Four (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), will matter less and less.

¶12. (SBU) What will come to matter more, argues David Kral of Europeum, are instances in which new member states can team up with larger, more established EU member states and cooperate on initiatives. Such was the case with Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski's Eastern Partnership Initiative, which he enlisted Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt to be a co-sponsor of, and was approved by EU foreign ministers on May 26, 2008 and by EU leaders on June 19-20 ¶2008. Piotr Kaczynski points to this example as Warsaw's most effective influencing of EU foreign policies since accession.

¶13. (SBU) On democratization, which each Central European state supports to varying degrees, there are differences in approach and prioritizations that stand in the way of greater cooperation at the EU level. On Russia policies, the region is also divided, but there is a possibility that Russia's increasingly hard line approach*such as in the case of recent gas cutoffs, the Georgia conflict, and Russian democratic backsliding*could serve to bring the positions of Central European states closer together. The European Council on Foreign Relations in late 2007 grouped the Central European states into three different groups when it comes to how they approach EU relations with Russia: Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia are termed Friendly Pragmatists; the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and Romania are dubbed Frosty Pragmatists; and Lithuania and Poland are hailed as the New Cold Warriors. While such groupings can provide a useful way to consider their likely strategies toward Moscow, the specific government in power in each state matters greatly in determining the overall tone and approach of relations. Indeed, domestic interests, including the prospect of closer economic ties, as well as historical narratives, where some states perceive that they benefited or suffered more during communism, tend to drive these different approaches to Russia among the Central European states within the EU.

¶14. (C) COMMENT: As the CE-10 continue to learn how the EU works and better understand how to influence its policies, opportunities for Washington to engage new member states on issues of mutual concern within the EU context will increase, provided governments in Central Europe continue to value close policy cooperation with the US. Issues the CE-10 are especially likely to welcome US collaboration on include energy security, Russia policy, EU enlargement, democratization and human rights, and climate change. If increased CE-10 integration in Brussels strengthens the EU overall, we should welcome it.

MURRAY

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